



Supreme Court of Illinois

March 18, 2016

ARTS-FOCUSED YOUTH DEVELOPMENT GROUP PERFORMED AT THE SUPREME COURT BUILDING IN SPRINGFIELD

A group of youth living in Illinois juvenile justice facilities and under-resourced communities performed original musical theatre inspired by their personal stories earlier this week at the Illinois Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court invited Storycatchers Theatre to perform for the Court on Monday, March 14, in the Courtroom of the Supreme Court building in Springfield. It is believed to be the first time such a performance took place in the Courtroom.

The performance also marked a first for Storycatchers Theatre, an award-winning organization that prepares young people to make thoughtful life choices by engaging them in the process of writing, producing, and performing.

"The performances were not only entertaining, they were thought-provoking and inspiring. As judges, we often hear cases involving juvenile offenders and juvenile victims. It is important that we be reminded, from time to time, that our decisions have far-reaching consequences for the lives of real people— especially young people," Chief Justice Rita B. Garman said. "I truly appreciate all of the hard work and commitment that went in to preparing these programs, and I want to thank everyone involved."

Storycatchers Theatre was founded in 1984 by Meade Palidofsky under the name Music Theatre Workshop. For the first decade, a company of professional actors performed original musicals based on stories from Chicago-area youth, using the performances as a way to start discussions.

In 1990, Ms. Palidofsky, the theatre's artistic director, began developing what would become Storycatchers Theatre's signature and innovative model of engaging court-involved or otherwise marginalized young people in the creative arts to help them explore and understand past choices and traumas to move toward a more constructive future.

It was then that Storycatchers Theatre shifted from youth stories performed by professional actors to youth writing and performing their own work. This change began at alternative schools, including the school at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center. The organization has since expanded its reach to include youth living in the Illinois Youth Centers in Warrenville and Chicago, as well as young people recently detained, incarcerated in adult prisons, or living in under-resourced communities in the Chicago area.

"Storycatchers' youth and staff were extremely honored to be invited to perform their work for the Supreme Court Justices," Ms. Palidofsky said. "It was a once in a lifetime experience for our youth. They were in awe of the building itself and overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the justices and invited audience. It gave our youth a sense of importance about the stories of their lives. It also gave them hope that their experiences in the justice system would help others.

MORE

Storycatchers Theatre Performed at Supreme Court Add One

Participants from the following three Storycatchers Theatre's programs performed Monday at the Illinois Supreme Court:

- Fabulous Females, a year-round program for girls living at the Illinois Youth Center in Warrenville;
- Firewriters, a year-round program for boys living at the Illinois Youth Center in Chicago; and
- Changing Voices, a post-release employment program for recently detained or incarcerated young people between the ages of 16 and 24.

Accompanied by live music, the performance included excerpts of the youth's original full-length musicals, all of which were inspired by personal stories that ranged in topic from addiction and court experiences to family relationships and their future.

In a question-and-answer session after the performance, some of the performers explained how Storycatchers Theatre has helped them and shared their future plans with the Supreme Court justices and dozens of guests, including officials and staff from the court and juvenile justice systems in Illinois.

One young man said Storycatchers Theatre gave him "a different perspective" on life and that he plans to go back to school and repair family relationships when he is released from juvenile detention.

Another performer said he is so busy writing for Storycatchers Theatre that he doesn't have time to get in trouble. One young woman pointed out her former probation officers and said, "I have changed."

An alumnus of the Changing Voices program told the audience that he joined Storycatchers Theatre following his 2014 release from prison. Although hesitant at first, he said he quickly learned that everyone faces problems and saw how sharing stories of struggles can help people relate to each other. Now a teaching assistant for the organization, he said he feels like a role model.

"Just because someone does a crime doesn't mean you should label them as a criminal for the rest of their life," he said, adding that if people look beyond the backgrounds and past crimes of juvenile offenders, they will see "a lot of good kids."

Storycatchers Theatre was recognized in 2013 with a National Arts & Humanities Youth Program Award for its positive work with court-involved youth. This award is given to 12 organizations each year. Ms. Palidofsky accepted the award from First Lady Michelle Obama at a ceremony at the White House.

Storycatchers Theatre has also received recognition in the form of grants from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority and the Cook County Justice Advisory Council to support its work with court-involved youth and productive relationship with the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice.

Candice Jones, director of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, attended Monday's performance at the Supreme Court and praised the work of Storycatchers Theatre, saying it has made her job easier.

"What the youth are doing with these performances are changing the dialogue about justice-involved youth in Illinois," Director Jones said. "This work is so critically important because it shows that when we make just a minimal investment in our youth, it pays dividends."

More information about Storycatchers Theatre is available on its website at www.storycatcherstheatre.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: Nancy McCarty, executive director of Storycatchers Theatre, at 312.280.4772, or Bethany Krajelis, senior communications specialist to the Illinois Supreme Court, at 312.793.0870.